

Infrastructure project wish list would cost \$5 billion

Sewer system is biggest cost on infrastructure list

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Almost a year ago, part of a retaining wall on the Oliver Street bridge fell into the White River on the Near Southside, forcing the closure of a traffic lane.

A few blocks south, Department of Public Works engineers have had to impose a weight limit on the Morris Street bridge.

And the sidewalks and curbs on the Meridian Street bridge over the White River on the Northside are crumbling.

The repairs needed at these locations are among the hundreds of infrastructure projects a new city commission has identified and that the city hopes to address over the next three decades.

To undertake them all would cost \$5 billion in present-day dollars, or about five times the city-county's annual budget.

The majority of the money will come from property owners in the form of ever-increasing sewer rates for a \$3.5 billion overhaul of the Marion County wastewater system. But the other \$1.5 billion -- with no funding source thus far identified -- is needed to repair roads, sidewalks, curbs, culverts and alleys.

Mayor Greg Ballard is passionate about infrastructure, calling it the basic blocking-and-tackling duty of city government. He has asked Michael Huber, director of enterprise development, to work with DPW officials and the commission to identify ways to pay for a massive investment without raising taxes.

Here's a quick look at what all acknowledge is a daunting task.

Bridges

The city plans to repair the Morris Street bridge for about \$6 million in 2011, but it has not identified funding for work on the Oliver or Meridian street bridges.

Fixing all of the city's bridges right now would cost an estimated \$291 million.

Larry Jones, DPW deputy director of transportation, said federal money is available for bridge repairs, but the challenge is finding the local matching funds. The city spends an average of \$5 million each year repairing bridges.

This year, DPW is doing a near replacement of the Lafayette Road bridge over Eagle Creek Reservoir, one of 10 bridges deemed "critical structures" based on length, traffic and age.

Jones said he's looking for federal grant money for the Meridian Street bridge because a project of that size would wipe out his budget for the year.

"There are some holes in the sidewalk so deep you can look down into the river," Jones said. "Mostly, we're just doing Band-Aids to keep people from being hurt."

Roads and sidewalks

The city's inventory of needed road repairs identifies 959 lane miles that would cost more than \$200 million to fix.

For years, the city spent about \$10 million to \$12 million annually resurfacing streets and repairing curbs and sidewalks. That amount has increased by about \$5 million the last two years, but the increase hardly keeps up with the rate of growth in the inventory list.

Huber, Ballard's efficiency expert, said federal stimulus money can help, but "it's tens of millions, and the need is in the billions." The estimated cost of sidewalk and curb repairs alone is nearly \$1 billion.

He said the city is playing catch-up after years of putting off investment in critical infrastructure.

"Our challenge is to come up with ideas that don't involve borrowing money and more tax increases," Huber said. "For instance, saving just 5 percent on sewer projects produces \$175 million, almost the amount we need to redo streets."

Sewers

Nearly three-quarters of the city's infrastructure needs are for a well-publicized \$3.5 billion overhaul of a sewer system that dumps raw sewage into area streams whenever it rains -- about 6 billion gallons each year.

The city does not have much choice but to raise sewer rates, because the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency will levy fines of a similar amount if the city doesn't upgrade the system.

The average monthly sewer bill, which was less than \$10 in 2005, is expected to rise to nearly \$30 by 2013. City engineers have been redesigning the projects to slow down rate increases. At this point, rates are projected to top \$100 per month by 2025.

Huber said the city hopes to keep rates in check or they could give people a reason to leave Marion County for the suburbs.

Additional Facts

MAJOR NEEDS

The city has identified infrastructure needs over the next 30 years that would cost \$5 billion to undertake in present-day dollars. Here's how that breaks down:

Wastewater projects: \$3.5 billion

\$1.7 billion: Federally mandated sewer overhaul over the next 20 years to stop dumping untreated sewage into area streams whenever it rains.

\$1.8 billion: Non-mandatory sanitary improvements that include water drainage projects and replacing failing septic tanks with city sewers.

Transportation challenges: \$1.5 billion

\$970 million: Curb and sidewalk repairs and new construction.

\$291 million: Bridge repairs.

\$175 million: Street resurfacing.

\$65 million: Alley resurfacing and repairs.

\$46 million: Culvert repairs.

\$16 million: Replace brickwork and repair Monument Circle and Market Street.